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ABSTRACT

Despite the rapid growth and popularity of the magnet school movement, little systematic research has been conducted on questions of vital importance in assessing the movement's impact on the quality of educational opportunities in big-city school districts. There are certain issues that are important and deserve immediate attention from educators concerned with the potential of magnet schools for improving and equalizing educational opportunity. For example, it is important to obtain information on the home environments of magnet school students as well as on their social class backgrounds. A determination on whether magnet schools are producing academic achievement gains, with emphasis on the achievement of students formerly attending predominantly poverty schools should also be made. Another important issue to be considered is whether full time enrollment should be required for purposes of desegregation in magnet schools. This issue is critical in considering the prospects for voluntary metropolitan desegregation. In addition, an inquiry should be made into the potential role magnet schools can play in the renewal of central city neighborhoods. (Author/EB)

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A STUDY OF SELECTED ISSUES INVOLVING MAGNET SCHOOLS IN BIG CITY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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A STUDY OF SELECTED ISSUES INVOLVING MAGNET SCHOOLS IN BIG CITY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to encourage researchers to examine several important issues regarding big city magnet schools which have not been systematically explored in previous research. These issues bear on the effects of magnet schools in big city efforts to reduce racial isolation and improve and equalize educational opportunity in desegregated settings. Major issues to be addressed include the following:

1. Do students who enroll in magnet schools differ from students who do not enroll relative to their socioeconomic status and/or home environment?
2. Is there evidence that magnet schools improve the academic achievement of students who enroll in them?
3. Are the purposes of magnet schools served as well by less than full time enrollment in magnet schools?
4. Are appropriately designed and located magnet schools serving as positive force in encouraging and facilitating urban renewal and redevelopment?

BACKGROUND

During the past four or five years, magnet schools have become a major component in desegregation plans in many big cities. Cities such as Dallas, Kansas City, and Milwaukee already have made magnet schools a central element in desegregation planning, and others such as Chicago and Los Angeles

were to implement large-scale magnet programs in the fall of 1978. Substantial sums of federal money are being made available to establish magnet schools as part of the desegregation process, and some cities such as Cincinnati are also using a large share of local resources to make desegregated magnet alternatives available to every student. In a very brief period of time magnet schools have become one of the most important educational trends in U. S. education.

Despite the rapid growth and popularity of the magnet-school movement, little systematic research has been conducted on questions of vital importance in assessing the movement's impact on the quality of educational opportunities in big-city school districts. It is true that some districts which have taken the lead in establishing magnet schools have been initiating in-house research to assess their impact (e.g. Cincinnati, Dallas), but these efforts have been somewhat fragmented and disjointed both within and across districts because evaluation resources have been limited and no uniform goals exist to guide a multi-district evaluation effort. To our knowledge, no systematic examination is being conducted of the issues specified above in our statement of purpose.

Until 1977 when Felix and Jacobs published a paper describing issues in evaluating alternative programs in Cincinnati,* virtually no data were available dealing with the impact of big-city magnet schools. Also in 1977, the U. S. Office of Education commissioned a major national study of magnet schools. The study was carried out by Abt Associates in accordance with USOE efforts to evaluate magnet schools programming as a component for desegregation under the Emergency School Aid Act. Necessarily, however,

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*Joseph L. Felix and James N. Jacobs, "Issues in Implementing and Evaluating Alternative Programs in Cincinnati" in Daniel U. Levine and Robert J. Havighurst (eds.), The Future of Big-City Schools. Berkeley, California: McCutchan, 1977.

the Abt Study was limited mostly to issues specified in the RFP and has been able to give little or no attention to the specific questions addressed in the study proposed herein.

The preliminary interim report of the Abt study was released on January 27, 1978. The final report at the time this paper was prepared was not available to us, but the interim report gives a concise summary of the issues the study is dealing with and the types of conclusions which are being documented. The abstract of the report summarizes preliminary conclusions as follows:

> Magnet schools appear to have some success in establishing themselves as desegregated schools and in meeting a limited set of objectives for the sub-areas of the school district, but a more restricted effectiveness in aiding desegregation efforts on a district-wide basis. There is also some evidence that magnet schools are effective in helping to improve attitudes toward desegregation, although the reasons for this are varied and often seem contradictory.*

The Abt study is primarily a descriptive study which deals with several important issues involving magnet schools. In addition to providing a general description of magnet schools in the 18 school districts included in its sample, the study examined the following factors: Type of Magnet Schools; Non-program Factors Affecting "Magnet Quality" (location, staff, voluntary nature, physical plant, concerns of community); Techniques Used in the Development of Magnet Schools (planning, publicity, non-educational services, parental involvement); and Desegregation in terms of attracting differing racial groups, impact on district-wide desegregation, and impact on community attitudes. All these considerations are of great importance and have been

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*Eugene C. Royster, D. Catherine Baltzell, and Keran Ferb, "Study of the Emergency School Aid Act Magnet School Program," Cambridge, Massachusetts: Abt Associates, Inc., January 27, 1978, Contract No. OE-300-77-0393.

so identified by researchers and otherpersons concerned with the establishment of big-city magnet schools.* (Levine and Campbell). Conclusions reached in the Abt study with regard to these issues can and should be vital in determining future magnet school policy. However, other issues need to be examined. These issues are important and deserve immediate attention from educators concerned with the potential of magnet schools for improving and equalizing educational opportunity.

1. Social Background

One of the most important questions about big city magnet schools is whether the students who enroll in them tend to be higher in social class background and/or home environment (as related to motivation for school achievement) than are students from the same local schools and neighborhoods who do not elect magnet options. Answering this question is critically important in order to be able to formulate an assessment of magnet schools on the following issues:

a. Do magnet schools "cream off" the most motivated and talented students from regular schools, leaving these latter schools lacking for such things (leadership, motivation and other positive peer influence)? or the converse, do they scrape leaving magnet school with low status students?

b. Do magnet schools have a positive impact on the attitudes, motivations and performance of the students who attend them?

Without knowing whether magnet students are higher in social class than other students who do not choose to attend, it is not possible to reach valid conclusions about the impact of magnet programs. Lacking such infor-

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*e.g. Daniel U. Levine and Connie Campbell, "Magnet Schools in a Big City Desegregation Plan"; Phi Delta Kappa, 57 (1976), 507-509. Daniel U. Levine and Connie Campbell, "Developing and Implementing Big-City Magnet School Programs" in Levine and Havighurst, op. cit.

mation, one might find, for example, that magnet students have more positive attitudes toward school than do students in home schools from which the magnet population is drawn, but it might very well be true that the magnet population had more positive attitudes toward schools and education related to their higher social background before they ever entered the magnet school. The same problem exists in assessing magnet school impact on aspirations, academic achievement, and other variables.

Controlling for income is some help in taking account of differences in social class background, but income alone is not a sufficient measure of socioeconomic status. Thus it might happen that groups of magnet and non-magnet students might be exactly the same on a variable like percent of students from poverty families, but the magnet population might be considerably higher on parental occupation, parental education, type of dwelling unit, and other indicators of socioeconomic status. A combination of these latter variables, in turn, is likely to be more closely related to school attitudes and outcomes than is a simple measure of income or poverty.*

Furthermore, home environment rather than social class per se appears to be the most important and immediate determinant of student scores on measures of aspirations, achievement, and other variables; it is primarily because social class tends to reflect home environment differences that it serves as a good predictor of such measures. This conclusion has been established by a number of studies including one in which high and low-achieving inner city black students who were matched on a composite socio-economic scale differed considerably in home environment as measured by a

*For example, Alexander and McDill found that a composite social status measure incorporating several variables is much more closely related to educational aspirations than is a single measure. Karl K. Alexander and Edward McDill, "Selection and Allocation Within Schools," American Sociological Review, v. 41, no. 6 (1976), 963-980.

widely-used parental interview questionnaire.* (Levine) The results of this study later were replicated for a tri-ethnic population (Anglo, Black, Chicano) of students attending inner city parochial schools.*** (Levine and Campbell) Thus it is important to obtain information not just on social class background but also on the home environment of magnet students. The importance of this issue in assessing the impact and role of magnet schools in a big city school desegregation plan have been emphasized as follows in a paper on magnet schools delivered by Carrison at the 1977 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association:

> One of the most irrational confusions in desegregation proposals is the confounding of the issues of race and poverty. It is not race that makes a slum school, but poverty....It is well documented that people of the same socio-economic class have many similar habits and beliefs whatever their racial or ethnic origins have been. Disadvantaged schools are associated with poorly educated and low economic families. Districts which comply with Court orders by placing poor whites in the poor blacks are perpetrating a cruel hoax upon both the children and the intent of the Court....If we accept the adage that the 'poor shall always be with us' what shall we do with their children? They did not ask to be born and raised in inadequate, hopeless, hungry, and frustrating environments....We can sequester them with...their hostilities in the same school. We can even call the school an integrated facility. But, until we understand that poverty and not race is the major problem, all desegregation plans represent, at best, short-term, partial and inadequate solutions.***

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*Daniel U. Levine, et. al., "The Home Environment of Students in a High Achieving Inner-City Parochial School and a Nearby Public School," Sociology of Education, Fall 1972, 435-445.

**Melba C. Carter and Daniel U. Levine, "Ethnicity, Home Environment, and Reading Achievement." Kansas City, Missouri: Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems in Education, 1977.

***Muriel Paskin Carrison, "The Magnet, The Poor and the Bus," Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, 1977.

Social class background for a study could be assessed using Hollingshead's Two Factor Index (Parental Education and Occupation of Social Position.) This instrument has been widely used with a good deal of success in varying populations including minority group students and economically disadvantaged students. It is easily administered in a few minutes along with a series of related questions on family structure, urban-rural background, and other demographic variables useful in determining whether magnet school students are socially similar to non-magnet students.

Home environment could be assessed for a carefully selected sample of students using a modification of a parental interview questionnaire originally developed by Dave and Wolf.* This and other home interview questionnaires were later reviewed and modified for use in school influence studies by Cicirelli** and then by Carter and Levine.*** Recent versions of the instrument generally take about one hour to administer and thus the number of students in the sample probably would be limited and researchers must exercise care in selecting a small sample representative of the larger populations which are to be compared. Given that there are resource limitations, the home interveiw questionnaire could be used selectively in a limited number of cities to compare groups of 20 to 25 magnet students matched for social class and other demographic variables in each location. The social-class background instrument, by way of contrast, can be administered on a widespread basis to magnet and non-magnet students in each city which is studied.

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*See Robin H. Farquhar, "Home Influences on Achievement and Intelligence: An Essay Review, "Administrator's Notebook, 13 (1965).
**Victor Circirelli, "Purdue Interview Schedule for Parents of Primary Grade Children." Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University, n.d.
***Carter and Levine, op. cit.

2. Achievement Effects.

The only reference on achievement effects which we have been able to find in the expanding literature on magnet schools is a brief section in Felix and Jacobs' paper on issues in evaluating alternative programs in Cincinnati.* After noting that achievement effects should be assessed in terms of both standardized norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests, the authors recognize that there are many difficulties in conducting such an assessment and state that no data are available at this time to indicate the achievement impace of current integration efforts.**

The possibility that achievement improvements may occur among students in big city magnet schools is particularly important when related to the forces which motivate urban students to enroll in such schools. Campbell and Levine has reviewed the situation in one big city school district and concluded that one of the useful contributions that magnet schools can make in a big city is to provide an opportunity for improved learning experiences for upwardly-mobile inner city students (racial minority and/or economically disadvantaged students in poverty areas) who otherwise would have to attend dysfunctional poverty schools.*** (They also point out that this means that school districts should have an overall strategy of which magnet schools are just one part for improving and equalizing opportunity for disadvantaged students.) However, this potential benefit of magnet schools is of no benefit to disadvantaged students in the inner city unless such schools really are helping to improve the achievement of students previously attending poverty schools.

*Felix and Jacobs, op. cit.
**Ibid., p. 114.
***Connie Moore (Campbell) and Daniel U. Levine, "Whitney Young Magnet High School of Chicago and Urban Renewal," Planning and Changing, v. 7, no. 4, (Winter 1977), 148-154.

Accordingly, a determination on whether magnet schools are producing academic achievement gains, with emphasis on the achievement of students formerly attending predominantly poverty schools should be made. To collect data on achievement is a massive task, but it is possible to utilize existing data rather than original data. Fortunately, some of the school districts most active in the magnet school movement also are widely respected for their extensive pupil information systems and for their efforts in evaluating the effects of their educational programs. This is particularly true in Cincinnati, Dallas, and Milwaukee where serious attention has been given to collecting data (including achievement data) and devising evaluation strategies for the assessment of magnet schools.

It should be noted that Dallas and Cincinnati are both particularly suitable districts in which to study achievement effects because they both have had their magnet schools in operation for several years. In the past few years it has become clear that academic gains among disadvantaged students in special programs may not be discernible until the second or third year of program operation.* This consideration should be given special attention in the selection of schools and school districts for the achievement impact part of a study. Another consideration that should be given explicit attention is the type of magnet school attended, since some magnet school programs - particularly at the high school level - may not have a consistent stress on improving academic achievement** and therefore should not be expected to have a clearcut achievement impact.

As noted above there is a dependence insofar as possible on existing data and reports for this part of the analysis, but in a few cases it may be necessary to prepare and analyze these data. For example, achievement

*John E. Coulson, "National Evaluation of the Emergency School Aid Act (ESSA): A Review of Methodological Issues," Journal of Educational Issues, V. 3, no. (1978), 1-60.

**Some performing arts magnets and some transportation magnets may fit this description.

data may be available in student records but may require coding and punching and merging with other data (e.g. on student background) in order to analyze achievement effects in a particularly promising magnet school in a school district. In any case, the achievement analysis should utilize the most appropriate methods available such as the regression-discontinuity model for examing the gains made by students in an experimental group and a comparison group.

3. Part-time Enrollment.

The question of whether full-time enrollment should be required for purposes of desegregation in magnet schools is emerging as the single most important policy issue in a number of cities. At the present time ESAA and other federal regulations require that enrollment be full-time in order to have a good chance to obtain federal support. Some courts also require that enrollment be full-time for purposes of desegregation.*

It is easy to understand why these requirements have been promulgated, given attempts which have been made in some districts to provide very limited contact between racial groups, and call this "desegregation." At the same time, however, it is far from clear that full-time enrollment for a full academic year is required to provide sufficient interracial contact to overcome the present or past effects of racial isolation. Stated differently, it is possible that part-time enrollment for all of an academic year or full-time enrollment for part of the year may be almost as beneficial in terms of desegregation as full-time enrollment for an entire year.

This issue is particularly serious because there are many districts which may be forced into an unwise and probably unnecessary choice between

*Daniel U. Levine and Nolan Estes. "Magnet Education in Dallas," Phi Delta Kappan, v. 59, no. 3 (1977), 163-167.

full-time magnet integration and little or no integration given current federal guidelines. In Kansas City, for example, the district is making a major effort to attract non-minority students to a formerly all-minority magnet high school in order to satisfy HEW requirements, but the district as a whole is seventy percent minority and, by necessity, non-minority students are being recruited from schools with forty to fifty percent minority students. This may result in "tipping" these latter schools and making them nearly all minority, whereas half-time enrollment if successful could accomplish a great deal more desegregation. The situation is particularly ludicrous because Kansas City already has a desegregated magnet-type technical institute which has been stably integrated on a half-time basis for nearly a decade, but the district is unable to build on this successful model in applying for federal assistance.

The issue of full-time enrollment also is critical in considering the prospects for voluntary metropolitan desegregation. In Boston, for example, thousands of central city and suburban students attend school together in special programs which may last only one or two months a year. It would be desirable if desegregated experience of this type lasted all year every year, but for various reasons that does not appear feasible on a widespread voluntary basis for most participants, and meanwhile it is probable that major desegregation gains are being made through these programs. At the least, it is not clear that such programs are worthless as a desegregation tool even though they are only part-time. More needs to be learned about the operation of such magnet programs and the degree to which they may make a positive contribution to the goals of desegregation.

A full-fledged study on this issue would necessitate a large project, but a small project could yield preliminary conclusions to serve as a basis

for subsequent study. The issue could be examined through the following means:

a) Survey of data available from the administrators of part-time magnet programs available in Boston, Dallas, and other cities.

b) Survey of the opinions of administrators, knowledgeable citizens, and other informed observers in these cities.

c) Analysis of the desegregation research literature bearing on the issue of part-time vs. full-time enrollment.

d) Analysis of the relative potential of full-time vs. part-time magnet school desegregation based on a national survey of desegregation based on a national survey of desegregation experts.

4. Magnet Schools In Urban Renewal.

Probably the most neglected aspect of the magnet school movement is its potential for aiding in constructive urban renewal. Levine and Campbell have summarized the situation in 1977 with respect to this possibility as follows:

> It is possible that magnet schools may play a vital role in the redevelopment of the inner city and in the conservation of racially and economically mixed neighborhoods by offering the superior opportunities for schooling needed to retain middle-class families in the central city. In Houston, school officials believe that their magnet program has helped encourage movement of young middle-class families into several deteriorated neighborhoods where older but structurally sound houses are now being restored. In Cincinnati, the magnet programs may be contributing to stability in attractive rewnewal neighborhoods such as the Walnut Hill neighborhood....But the generalization that magnet schools may play a major part in city planning cannot be viewed as an established fact in any city.*

To some extent research such as we described above concerning the social status of magnet students can help determine whether magnets are retaining white and black middle-status families and thus contributing to racial and economic desegregation of the central city. This is not the same, however,

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*Levine and Campbell, "Developing and Implementing," op. cit., p. 263.

as inquiring whether magnet schools can play a key part in the renewal of central city neighborhoods. To begin to answer the latter question, it is necessary to identify neighborhoods in which this may be happening, collect case study material on the role of magnet schools in this process and analyze the material to identify magnet policies and practices which contribute significantly to renewal. In this connection a proposed project would carry out these activities as follows:

a) An effort should be made to identify magnet schools which may be making a major contribution to positive urban renewal. As mentioned earlier, such schools may exist in Houston and Cincinnati but a determination cannot be made without visiting the schools and learning more about them. Since 1977 we have heard of several additional magnet schools which may be helping to renew big city neighborhoods. In St. Paul, for example, the Webster Magnet School is located in a neighborhood near downtown which had become very deteriorated. Since Webster was established with an $800,000 addition and an attractive enrichment program, the school has become racially and economically integrated, prominent families are sending their children from other neighborhoods, new housing and housing rehabilitation efforts have greatly expanded, and businesses have begun to invest large sums of money in the neighborhood. Attempts to identify similar situations in other cities should be made.

b) The case study material could be analyzed and summarized in order to derive generalizations about the ways in which magnet schools can contribute to constructive urban renewal. For example, an assessment of the importance of cooperation between school and city

officials in undertaking such renewal, the ways in which community organizations can aid in carryingit out, and the degree to which publicity in city-wide media is required to disseminate information about magnet possibilities in the school and the neighborhood.

In no way have I even turned over the earth on issues which should be examined before we proceed with blind speed to establish magnet schools, but hopefully, I have pricked your interest and you researchers will go forward and examine these salient issues as they relate to magnet school programs.